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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews a variety of the policies, programs, and practices to prevent youth violence so that local leaders can base decisions on the experience of other communities. The effectiveness of school violence prevention initiatives is increased by public policies that reinforce their message and by community programs that attempt to prevent or relieve youth violence. Antiviolence policies and programs in the schools run the gamut from general educational improvement to interventions that target specific types of illegal or antisocial behavior. The most effective, whether for overall school improvement or school safety policies, are directed by a clearly defined administrative entity and have line-item budgetary status. Prevention strategies, which may include student monitoring and other security measures, are among the most commonly used approaches. Antiviolence and antigang strategies that involve instruction in conflict management are among the most effective programs. The components of successful programs vary, but the most effective rely on accurate assessment of the problem, use of community resources, early intervention, consistent enforcement, and persistence. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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DIGEST

Number 115, October 1996 EDO-UD-96-4 ISSN 0889 8049

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AN OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIES TO REDUCE SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Violence among youth, especially in schools, is one of American society's most pressing concerns. It is also a source of controversy. While no recent nationwide study of the real extent of youth violence is available, small-scale and regional studies indicate that youth violence is increasing, at least slightly. In addition, youth, like adults, are now more frequently using guns instead of fists to settle disputes. And, lastly, whereas youth violence had once been thought to be an urban public school problem and a consequence of poverty and family dysfunction, stable suburban and rural communities are now also experiencing it, as are private schools.

However, despite sensational anecdotal media reports suggesting that the public is generally unsafe because of youth lawlessness, it is likely that youth violence is not as pervasive as is feared. In fact, some who spend their workday in schools think that they are among the safest places a child can be. Further, recent surveys indicate that the most prevalent type of youth crime is theft, and the most common types of violence are fistfights, bullying, and shoving matches.

While the public is ready to believe that school violence is ever-present, some local leaders and school administrators are not willing to acknowledge its occurrence on their own watch. Their position is based on the fear that people will boycott communities and schools labeled unsafe, and that they will be blamed for failing to keep the peace. Gang activity at school is particularly susceptible to "the Ostrich syndrome," as administrators may ignore the problem. An unfortunate consequence of such denial is that opportunities to reduce violence are lost.

Finally, there is sometimes a contradiction between school policies and practice. Whereas many districts and schools have comprehensive regulations for dealing with violence, enforcement may be uneven or lax. This creates a situation where teachers do not feel supported when they impose discipline, students do not feel protected, and the violence-prone think they will not be punished. Conversely, administrators express dismay that teachers do not enforce policies in their classrooms.

Despite these inconsistencies, many promising types of anti-violence strategies, focusing on both discipline and social and personal transformation, have been devised by government, communities, and schools. Most have originated in urban areas, where youth violence was first identified. This digest reviews a variety of the policies, programs, and practices to prevent youth violence (which are described more fully in the publications cited at the end), so that local leaders can base decisions about their own efforts on the experience of other communities.

Public Support of Violence Prevention

The effectiveness of school violence prevention initiatives is increased considerably by public policies that reinforce their anti-violence message and by community programs that themselves seek to prevent or ameliorate youth violence.

Government Initiatives

Legislation now exists at all levels of government to reduce the availability of guns, particularly the sale of weapons to minors. Weapons offenses are adjudicated more harshly in general, and the practice of trying violent juvenile offenders as adults is growing. Some states now hold parents legally responsible for certain behavior of their children, such as truancy and delinquency.

To deal specifically with violence in schools, President Bill Clinton signed the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act, mandating a one-year expulsion for students who bring weapons to school and bolstering the "zero tolerance" for weapons policies of some states and school districts already in existence. The Federal government, and most states, also make funds available for prevention activities through anti-crime and education legislation. These include anti-gang programs and other very focused prevention education, as well as more general recreational activities.

Community Initiatives

Community activities frequently focus on breaking family cycles of violence. The most effective are long-term interventions providing a range of family services. They involve the collaborative efforts of religious and recreational organizations; social service, public housing and health agencies; the business community; the schools; and law enforcement agencies. For example, programs in parenting skills and family relationships, particularly those focusing on nonviolent living skills and recovery from substance abuse, can protect children from learning violence at home. Programs in conflict resolution and anger management are similar to those discussed below that are designed for students.

Out-of-school programs (either independently operated or school-sponsored) keep youth constructively engaged when their families are unavailable, and provide them with attention from caring adults and good role models. They also keep youth away from negative influences on the street and television violence. Programs can also offer educational enrichment and

assistance with school work, and help participants develop positive values. Those most effective at violence prevention actively pursue the prevention goals of local schools and serve as extensions of school prevention activities.

Helping young people find employment is an important way for communities to reduce property crime and help build adolescents' self-esteem and sense of responsibility. Having a job also helps youth appreciate how important staying in school is to their future career plans. Providing parents with jobs and job training is also a way to lower stresses that can trigger violence.

Community campaigns to supplement school programs against gangs are crucial because gang membership cuts across school lines. In fact, there is gang activity in all 50 states now, and gangs recruit and are active nationwide. Effective anti-gang programs include crisis intervention teams comprised of the police, probation officers, and community leaders; intensive community, family, and youth education programs; alternative youth activities; and a long-term commitment.

School District and School Initiatives

School anti-violence policies and programs run the gamut from general educational improvement efforts to interventions that target specific types of illegal or antisocial behavior. The most effective are directed by a clearly-defined administrative entity, and have line-item budgetary status. They involve parents in a variety of roles and, as appropriate, also draw on community leaders and resources. Initiatives are directed at both preventing violence and at punishing and rehabilitating perpetrators. Their goal is to create a safe school community that believes in and practices nonviolence in resolving differences.

Overall School Improvement

In recognition of the fact that student misbehavior (and even gang membership) can be a reaction to ineffective schooling and to feelings of frustration and failure, some districts are restructuring schools to increase student engagement, attendance, and performance. Indeed, school reform programs around the country, especially those requiring strong family involvement, report increased attendance and student satisfaction. Many schools that cannot totally restructure still strive to better meet the education needs of students through more accurate identification of learning disabilities and personal attention. A related reform is downsizing schools, since it has been widely documented that smaller schools have fewer disruptions and incidences of violence.

Schools can also reduce violence by promoting mutual respect among all members of their community, student self-respect, and appreciation for diversity. They demonstrate respect for students through availability of good facilities and resources, such as up-to-date textbooks, laboratories, and computer equipment. It is also believed that the appearance of a school adds to the perception of safety, and that a well cared for school is less susceptible to vandalism and violence. Unfortunately, schools in urban areas, where violence can be a particular problem, are among the most overcrowded and poorly equipped and maintained.

School Safety Policies

Institutionalization of a code of conduct demonstrates a commitment to violence prevention and helps staff and students feel safe. The code should clearly explain school rules and punishments for infractions. A cornerstone of all policies is the Federally-mandated "zero tolerance for guns" provision. Some schools also institute zero tolerance provisions for other types of offenses, such as assaulting a teacher, so that violent students can be removed from regular classrooms. Because some disruptive students might welcome expulsion, many policies assert that the school response to certain specified acts will be legal prosecution.

Dress regulations, particularly those forbidding clothing associated with gang membership, are increasingly popular. Requiring uniforms is thought to increase students' commitment to school goals and to reduce theft of expensive clothing and jewelry.

Policies can be created at three levels: district, school, and classroom. Since there are different concerns at each one, it is reasonable for students to be governed by several complementary policies. Collaborative development by administrators, teachers, parents, and even students, with a review for legal compliance, helps ensure that a policy will be respected and enforced. Periodically reviewing a policy for appropriateness, effectiveness, and completeness maintains its usefulness over time. Copies are given to administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Students may also have the rules explained to them in assembly or a classroom to be sure they understand the purpose of the rules, the parameters of acceptable behavior, and the consequences of infractions.

Prevention Strategies

School Security. The most common school security measure is the monitoring of students when they move through the hallways and in places where they congregate, such as restrooms and the cafeteria. School staff members have traditionally served as monitors, but increasingly schools are hiring security guards to patrol the building and to provide security at events. In the most violence-prone areas schools may form partnerships with the police to visit periodically or even to patrol the halls regularly. However, some educators believe that a police presence has a negative impact on teaching and learning and that the need for them is an indication of administrative failure. Others welcome police support but provide special training for dealing with students in a school environment. Probation officers with on-site offices can provide help to students who have already engaged in illegal behavior.

Some schools use parents as monitors and teachers' aides. Doing this is inexpensive and can be an effective deterrent, since students may be more reluctant to behave badly when watched by someone they regularly see in the neighborhood. Further, involving parents

gives them a sense of ownership of anti-violence efforts and may help them reconsider their own attitudes about violence.

To keep students from bringing in weapons some schools use metal detectors and others administer systematic or random searches of students' bodies, possessions, and lockers. Since there is a strong relationship between student violence and use and sale of drugs, administrators make special efforts to keep schools drug-free, through both education campaigns and searching. The courts have been divided about the constitutionality of searches for either weapons or drugs, however, and some methods, such as use of drug-sniffing dogs, are being challenged legally.

Teacher Involvement. To dispel fears and help teachers feel supported, meetings about violence issues are held regularly, possibly as a component of general staff meetings. Administrators provide accurate information about violent occurrences and responses to them, involve faculty members in prevention efforts, and listen to their concerns. Also, teachers' input can be invaluable, since it is common for them to have information about the threat of violence (and, also, gang activities) before administrators do, and to have suggestions for how to deal with it based on personal knowledge of the students. Teachers can also meet in groups to discuss ways to establish and maintain control of their classroom and a climate conducive to learning, and to brainstorm strategies for working with disruptive students.

Training in violence prevention—for ancillary staff such as school bus drivers, as well as teachers—can both make the school safer and help staff feel more secure. Programs can include development of the ability to identify students at risk of anti-social behavior for preventive intervention, to identify and diffuse potential violence, and to deal safely with violence should it erupt. Some staff training covers the same issues that comprise training for students, such as conflict resolution, and it can be effective for staff to participate along with students.

Since at-risk students respond positively to personal attention, teachers can help youth resist violent impulses and the lure of drugs and gangs by offering them extra help with their schoolwork, referrals, informal counseling, or even just a sympathetic ear.

Prevention Programs

Anti-Violence. Early intervention is necessary to prevent youth violence. Elementary education training in anger management, impulse control, appreciation of diversity, and mediation and conflict resolution skills can help prevent youth from engaging in violence as they mature. Early discussions about the negative consequences of gang membership, and providing children with positive ways of getting personal needs met, can protect them from future gang recruitment efforts. Educating young children about the use of guns is also valuable, since accidents have happened as a result of children's naivete about their danger.

Age-appropriate training in self-esteem development and stress management and reduction, especially for students living in poverty or in difficult family circumstances, can help transform negative feelings into positive coping skills. Other types of training, introduced to students at later developmental stages, covers development of "refusal skills" to help youth resist using substances and engaging in sexual activity, and how to prevent date violence, with particular attention to battering during teenage pregnancy.

Some schools have a specially trained safety coordinator or a committee whose primary function is to coordinate anti-violence programs and to respond to crisis situations by offering counseling and mediation. Schools may also have crisis centers, which are staffed places where students who commit or threaten an act of violence can go to receive on-the-spot counseling and to "cool off."

Other types of programs take a positive approach to violence prevention by offering incentives for good behavior, such as a recognition and reward system for good school citizenship. The goal is to bring about a change in the students and school climate so that normative behavior is constructive. Bringing high profile community leaders to the school to discuss crime and violence is a way to provide students with positive role models.

Anti-Gang. Even more than violence prevention in general, effective anti-gang strategies involve all school operations and staff. They require establishment of a positive school climate, good communications and security, a staff trained in crisis intervention, and a coordinated effort. They also require that schools not only acknowledge a gang presence, but that they actively investigate its extent and accurately determine who the members are, what they do, and where they congregate. Finally, good strategies require schools to acknowledge that preventing, and even reducing, gang activity will be a protracted trial-and-error process during which many different tactics are employed.

A first step is often establishing and widely publicizing the philosophy that a gang presence (clothing and paraphernalia, as well as behavior) will not be tolerated. Policies that flow from the philosophy include a dress code and prohibition on flashing gang signs, shouting gang slogans, and writing gang graffiti on school or personal property. Discipline measures, meted out consistently, which escalate with the number or severity of infractions, demonstrate school seriousness.

Schools with gangs take stronger security measures, such as more extensive monitoring, than schools experiencing minimal random violence. Some also work with the police to increase communication about gang activity and the community to coordinate prevention efforts.

Schools make an extra effort to involve potential and active gang members in academic, extracurricular, and counseling programs. Providing gang members with effective educational supports, such as tutoring, can reconnect them with the rewards and value of academic achievement. Staff who takes a personal interest in individual members can help loosen the hold of the gang. By meeting informally with members and arranging for positive experiences that are probably otherwise lacking

in their lives, staff can provide students with some of the affirmation that gangs offer. To do this, staff members may need to change their attitudes about gang members and take more time with certain students than they usually would.

Involving parents by providing them with information about their children's gang activity and its possible consequences, and counseling to help them deal with the problem, can enlist them as allies in the effort to rid the school of gangs. Schools can also provide access to outside agencies that offer counseling. As a last resort, gang members can be transferred to alternative schools for more intensive support.

Remedies and Discipline

School districts are aware that some students simply cannot function in a regular classroom, and many have created alternative schools for students who have been suspended or expelled, or are at risk of suspension. These schools incorporate intensive individual and group counseling into the educational program. To prevent the alternative schools from becoming warehouses that fail to turn around disruptive students, staff takes care to develop individual plans for students with the goal of returning them to a regular school.

Schools also may provide similar programs as an add-on for students who are placed in detention or who remain in their regular school. Some effective intervention programs focus on modifying beliefs and related behavior; examples include aggression replacement and anti-bullying training. Some districts include a community service component in their alternative program; a few even require that students' volunteer assignments allow them to see the results of violence firsthand, so they may work with injured crime victims.

Conclusion

Concern about increasing youth violence is being channeled into a variety of innovative, and potentially effective, programs around the country. Although components vary depending on the particular needs of the community, the most effective programs:

- Make an accurate assessment of the existence of violence and, especially, gang activity.
- Use all the resources in the community, including social service and law enforcement, and not just rely on school officials to deal with the problem.
- Incorporate family services into both community and school programs.
- Intervene early in a child's life.
- Include not only anti-violence strategies but also positive experiences.
- Create and communicate clearly defined behavior codes, and enforce them strictly and uniformly.
- Prepare to engage in a long-term effort.

In all communities it is likely that sometimes anti-violence work will be compromised by lack of resources and time, and that even the most dedicated individuals will feel frustrated. Early evaluations of well-organized programs suggest that success is possible, though; and statistics demonstrating an increase in youth violence, however slight, indicate that the effort and the expenditure are necessary.

— Wendy Schwartz

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